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AUTHOR Ganser, Tom
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ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions on how to help new teachers during their first year of teaching by offering a mentorship program with an established teacher on the school staff. A mentor is someone to whom the first-year teacher can turn during all the turbulence that is part of beginning any career, but especially for a beginning teacher in a roomful of difficult children. This type of mentoring is more likely to succeed if certain guidelines are followed and modified as necessary to meet the needs of the particular school and staff. Approaching the project as a full-staff development project is suggested as one way to a successful program. It is also recommended that one take time to outline carefully what is expected of the mentor and the beginning teacher, allowing for flexibility. Confidentiality between mentor and beginning teacher is important, and the mentor must provide continuous feedback, rather than final evaluation. Mentors should be formally prepared for their role as mentor, and they should receive on-going support in this additional staff role. Further considerations are that the mentoring program is an addition to, not a substitute for, principal and teacher assistance to first-year teachers and that the working environment conditions must be considered. The age of the first-year teacher is also an important factor in mentorship. It is suggested that such a mentorship program is a powerfully positive professional experience for both the beginning and veteran teacher. (Contains 20 references.) (NAV)

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A Road Map for Designing Quality Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers

Tom Ganser, Ph. D.

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

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This paper was prepared for presentation at the 1995 annual conference of the Wisconsin Association for Middle Level Education on April 29, 1995, in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

Criticisms and reactions to this paper are invited by the author.

Tom Ganser, Ph.D., Director
Office of Field Experiences
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Whitewater, WI 53190-1790
Telephone: (414) 472-1123
FAX: (414) 472-5716
Internet: gansert@uwwvax.uww.edu

Tom Ganser is Director of the Office of Field Experiences at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He also directs the UW-Whitewater Beginning Teacher Assistance Program, the longest continuously operating mentoring program for teachers in the United States, and conducts mentor training workshops.

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A Road Map for Designing Quality Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers

Scattered among familiar faces at your first staff meeting this year may be a new face or two. Sitting near the second most senior faculty member may be one of the more than 100,000 annual graduates of teacher education programs throughout the United States, 22 years old and squeaky clean. Another face may be vaguely familiar, like that of the "new" Grade 4/5 teacher sitting in the corner who is returning to work after a family-raising hiatus of 11 years. Not only has she changed since the last time she set up a gradebook (now, a computer program), but she senses that what you expect of her may have changed, too.

Historically, the lot of beginning teachers has been nothing to cheer about. Sometimes they even walk into a classroom that has been stripped of books, bulletin board materials, and other teaching resources by teachers who knew that Ms. O'Brien or Mr. Caldwell wasn't returning next year. Veterans of 15 or 20 years of teaching, believing that they have put in their time with difficult children, think it's only fair that the new teachers in the building have the "opportunity" to get the more "challenging" classes. In these and other ways, the occupation of teaching has legitimized the misconception that the only (or at least, best) way to become a good teacher is to survive the "sink-or-swim" first years of teaching. Or, if you can't stand the heat, then get out of the schoolhouse.

As principal, you may tell new teachers, "My door is always open. Don't hesitate for a second to see me if you have a problem you need to talk about"--and really mean it. But that means that (1) they have to admit to themselves--and to you--that they have a problem and (2) they have to make the first move. Other teachers in the school may make the same kind of offer, but the trap is about the same.

Having an experienced colleague to turn to for everything from how to organize a field trip to the zoo to whom to call if child abuse is suspected can go a long way to change a beginning teacher's experiences from "baptism by fire" nightmares to opportunities to settle into teaching gracefully. This colleague might be called a "buddy teacher" or a "peer coach," but regardless of the name, he or she is a mentor.

Mentoring of beginning teachers occurs in different formats and is sponsored by different organizations, including state departments of education, colleges or universities, consortia of schools, and larger school districts (DeBolt, 1992). But you can also promote mentoring in your own school. Although just finding someone willing to be a mentor can work, your efforts to promote mentoring are more likely to succeed if you take into account the following guidelines, modifying them as necessary to meet the needs of your school and your staff. Moreover, since it really takes an entire faculty to welcome a beginning teacher into the profession and into the school--not just a mentor or a principal--a mentoring program is even more likely to take hold

if you approach it as a staff development project for everyone.

• **Resources.** At a minimum, beginning teachers and mentors need time together, both to be in one another's classroom and to meet together. Being able to attend a professional development activity or workshop together is also a plus. The time needed can have a price tag if it means hiring substitute teachers, but there are ways around this. You might cover a class yourself so that the beginner can observe his or her mentor introduce a math concept. Or other teachers might help out so that beginner and mentor can meet together for thirty minutes twice a week. Decisions about resources should be made up-front since what can be expected reasonably from a school-based mentoring program depends on available resources.

• **Goals and objectives.** Mentoring can serve several purposes. It can be there to provide moral support, to keep quality teachers in the classroom, to guide them in curricular matters, and to assist them in developing their teaching skills and strategies. Mentoring can also be aimed at improving beginning teachers' understanding of the unique history, customs, and culture of the school in which they work; charting a course for their long-term professional development; and meeting state mandates. It is important to decide on your goals and objectives early on and to prioritize them.

• **Program evaluation.** The time to decide on how best to measure the success of your mentoring program is at the beginning. Meeting with beginning teachers and their mentors

near the start, at an interim point, and at the end may be all that is necessary. Or a simple survey may provide all the useful information you need. To prevent a "conflict of interests," it may be wise to ask someone else besides you to solicit and summarize this information, perhaps a professor from a local college or university or a recently retired teacher. Naturally, the feedback sought should be related to the goals and objectives established.

• **Roles, responsibilities, and mentoring activities.** Take time to outline carefully what is expected of the mentor and the beginning teacher, but allowing for flexibility. The roles, responsibilities, and mentoring activities established should reflect the goals and objectives, and the available resources.

Recommended activities include the following:

Meetings. How often should beginning teacher and mentor meet? Where? For what purposes (e.g., planning a lesson, pre- and post observation conference, role-playing parent-teacher conferences)? It is important that meeting times be scheduled regularly and in advance, not just "as needed" or when a crisis occurs. Talking about successes is every bit as important as solving problems.

Classroom visitations. Will the beginning teacher and mentor be able to visit each other's classroom? How often? How will class coverage be provided? When possible, beginning teachers also profit from visiting

the classrooms of other teachers in the same school or in other schools.

Demonstration teaching. Is the mentor expected to do demonstration teaching? Will classroom coverage be necessary? If so, how will it be provided. Naturally, the desirability of the mentor doing demonstration teaching for the beginner may depend on the similarity between their teaching assignments.

Journals. Should the beginning teacher be required to keep a journal? Should the journal topics be unstructured or unstructured? If some or all of the topics are determined ahead of time, who will write them? Should the journal be read and responded to by other persons and if so, whom? Journaling may be an appropriate substitute for or complement to face-to-face meetings between beginning teacher and mentor.

Workshops. Will the beginning teacher and mentor be expected to attend workshops together sponsored by the district? By relevant professional organizations?

Two predictable issues regarding mentor roles are confidentiality and evaluation. Regarding confidentiality, neither you nor other staff members should expect access to what the beginner and mentor discuss. A second very sensitive issue for beginning teachers and mentors is evaluation. Mentors and beginning teachers are usually very uncomfortable when mentors are participate in anything that looks like summative evaluation.

Mentors should be expected to provide feedback to their proteges, both informally and as based on systematic observation of teaching, but in the spirit of "helpful feedback" rather than "final evaluation." At the same time, beginners welcome their mentors' giving them a "dry run" of your formal evaluation process.

It is also important to describe the roles and responsibilities of other school professionals in mentoring besides those of the beginning teacher and mentor. Include the principal, other leaders in the school (e.g., team leader), other teachers, and professional support staff (e.g., counselor, librarian). Failing to attend to the roles of these others persons in mentoring may cause them to feel disenfranchised. It can also cause them to view the mentor as a "fix-it" person who is completely and exclusively responsible for the beginning teacher.

- **Mentor selection.** Determine the criteria and process for selecting mentors. When possible, aim to establish a pool of prospective mentors in advance of need. In practice, the most common and frequently only selection criterion is willingness to serve. This may be expedient, but using multiple criteria, though more time-consuming and difficult to implement, may result in more qualified prospective mentors and in showing that mentoring is taken seriously enough to warrant a careful selection procedure.

- **Mentor preparation.** Mentoring shares much in common with

good teaching and with another common role for teachers, that of cooperating teacher for student teachers. The case can be made that it is also similar to other common interpersonal relationships, including parent and older sibling (Ganser, 1994). However, the similarity of mentoring to these more common roles can lead to dangerous assumptions, including that being a good middle school language arts teacher and an effective cooperating teacher for students from State University means Mr. Ogisa will be a good mentor. It is more accurate to think that being a good teacher and cooperating teacher are necessary but not sufficient conditions for being a good mentor.

There are two dimensions to preparing teachers to serve as mentors, content and skills, and delivery system. First, mentoring calls for knowledge of specific content and facility with specific skills. The content includes such topics as adult development, beginning teachers (e.g., characteristics, perceived needs, and developmental stages), and teacher socialization (e.g., influence of biography, and preservice teacher education coursework and field experiences). Since the beginning teachers with whom mentors work are adults and not children, they also should be familiar with the basic principles of adult learning as a complement to what they already know about how children learn.

The skills required of mentors include but extend beyond those associated with good teaching (e.g., communication, needs assessment, individualization of instruction). Mentors need to be proficient in conferencing skills. They also need to be

familiar with systematic observation of teaching, including the clinical observation cycle (pre-observation conference, observation, post-observation conference).

A second dimension of mentor preparation is how teachers will be given an opportunity to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills. Mentor training might be provided as a stand-alone inservice activity, preferably before mentors ever meet with their proteges. The principal, a district staff development person, someone from a college or university, or, after time, experienced mentors, might provide the training. Alternatively, mentors might at the very least be provided with relevant readings and the opportunity to discuss them (e.g., Bey and Holmes, 1990; Bey and Holmes, 1992; Bullough, 1989; Bullough, Knowles, and Crow, 1991; Dollase, 1992; Gordon, 1991; Heller and Sindelar, 1991; Huling-Austin, 1990b; Odell, 1990; Ryan, 1992; Sullivan, 1992, Zeichner and Gore, 1990).

One of the shortcomings of many staff development programs is that they are "front-end loaded." That is, information, skills, and strategies are presented at the beginning, with little opportunity for systematic application, practice, and follow-up. Learning about mentoring is no different. Experienced mentors are insistent in calling for on-going support during their tenure as mentors. For example, one mentor simply asked, "Who's there for the mentor?" (Ganser, 1995). Accordingly, plans for mentor preparation should also include plans for scheduled opportunities (at least monthly) when mentors

can get together to discuss their experiences, seek the advice of fellow mentors, and share their successes.

• **Pairing beginning teachers and mentors.** Successful mentoring depends in part on how carefully beginning teachers and mentors are matched (Ganser, 1992). Even if the pool of prospective mentors is limited, knowing about important matching factors is helpful in preventing problems down the line (Ganser, in press). Some factors are obvious. For example, beginning teachers and mentors should have similar teaching assignment and have classrooms located near to one another. Other factors are more subtle. For instance, a middle range of teaching experience (about 8-15 years) is recommended for mentors. Why? If mentors have just a few years of teaching experience, beginners may question their expertise, but if mentors are nearing retirement beginners may doubt their ability to remember what it was like to be a new teacher. Additional factors to consider in pairing beginners and mentors include teaching ideology and gender.

Because mentoring is complicated and a "squishy business" (Huling-Austin, 1990a), what seems to be a bad match between beginner and mentor can work out beautifully, and the ideal can prove to be a disaster. Even pairing an early elementary teacher with an upper elementary teacher can be successful, since many of the issues and concerns of beginning teachers cut across different grade levels or content areas (e.g., how to deal with an irate parent or how to request permission to attend a conference). Finally, you must decide how to define and

terminate an unsuccessful mentoring relationship in such a way that both the beginner and the mentor can maintain their dignity.

Additional considerations. There are a few other issues to bear in mind in beginning a school-based mentoring program. First, mentoring must be viewed as one part of the assistance provided to beginning teachers. It is not a substitute for what a principal and other teachers can and must offer to a beginning teachers. Moreover, the influence of a terrific mentor may not overcome bad working conditions or the poor native ability and preparation of a beginning teacher. Second, beginning teachers come in many packages. The 21-year-old beginning teacher is a very different critter from the 42 year-old former accountant, and your mentoring program must take this into account to maximize its usefulness.

When it works well, mentoring is a powerfully positive professional experience for both beginner and veteran teacher (Ganser, 1993). A mentor provides someone for the beginner to reach to in all the turbulence that is part of beginning any career, and especially as a teacher in a room filled with children. In the words an experienced mentor,

> Well, for beginners, of course, I just think the benefit of mentoring is the feeling that they are not drowning, that there really is, maybe not a life preserver, as much as a tree that they can hold to that's above the water, a piece of solid ground that they can somehow use to get their footing to plunge back in.

At the same time, a beginner provides someone to whom an experienced teacher can pass on the torch of experience and an opportunity for an important career experience (Fessler and Christensen, 1992). And for you, mentoring can help newcomers settle in to their work more smoothly and much more quickly than if they are left to fend for themselves. Thoughtfully planned and carefully implemented, a school-based mentoring program is always a winner.

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